



The Qualitative Report

Volume 22 | Number 11

Article 17

11-27-2017

Material Forms: What is Really Going On? Shaping Who We Are and What We Do

Vicky J. Grube

Appalachian State University, grubev@appstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Art and Materials Conservation Commons](#), [Art Education Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Interactive Arts Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Grube, V. J. (2017). Material Forms: What is Really Going On? Shaping Who We Are and What We Do. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(11), 3075-3087. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss11/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Material Forms: What is Really Going On? Shaping Who We Are and What We Do

Abstract

Using visual and ethnographic methods the author forms a connection between materiality and the memories of childhood. The researcher begins by asking the question, “Can a studio environment create encounters between a researcher and preschool children that deepen understanding of culture?” To this end, the researcher engaged in sensory research practices through ethnographic methods in a preschool art studio. Through free choice art making, children were found expressing their emotions and demonstrating an awareness of adult culture. In particular, the researcher’s encounter with four-year old George was enriched through sensory participation and triggered embodied and empathetic knowing. As it happens, conducting this research through the shared sensory attributes of art materials, the researcher was sent reeling. The encounter with memories of her childhood were unforeseen and disturbing. Art materials, it appears, can reveal cultural knowledge and can also serve as emotional bookmarks of time. Materials can juxtapose the past with the present, linking then with now. Feeling is embedded in the artifact and can release provocative memories. Materials from childhood create the self for what it is.

Keywords

Visual Ethnography, Art, Autoethnography, Uncensored Culture of Childhood, Memory, Sensory Ethnography

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Material Forms: What is Really Going On? Shaping Who We Are and What We Do

Vicky J. Grube

Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

Using visual and ethnographic methods the author forms a connection between materiality and the memories of childhood. The researcher begins by asking the question, “Can a studio environment create encounters between a researcher and preschool children that deepen understanding of culture?” To this end, the researcher engaged in sensory research practices through ethnographic methods in a preschool art studio. Through free choice art making, children were found expressing their emotions and demonstrating an awareness of adult culture. In particular, the researcher’s encounter with four-year old George was enriched through sensory participation and triggered embodied and empathetic knowing. As it happens, conducting this research through the shared sensory attributes of art materials, the researcher was sent reeling. The encounter with memories of her childhood were unforeseen and disturbing. Art materials, it appears, can reveal cultural knowledge and can also serve as emotional bookmarks of time. Materials can juxtapose the past with the present, linking then with now. Feeling is embedded in the artifact and can release provocative memories. Materials from childhood create the self for what it is.

Keywords: Visual Ethnography, Art, Autoethnography, Uncensored Culture of Childhood, Memory, Sensory Ethnography

She emptied his pockets of their miscellaneous contents: item, an ink-stained handkerchief; item, come bait; item, a few lozenges stuck together with fluff. All these she threw on the floor; the rest of the hoard, consisting of a miniature hand in ivory, a marble, the cap of a fountain-pen, she deposited in one of the drawers of the wardrobe.

Here was the treasure, a treasure impossible to describe because the miscellaneous objects in the drawer had been so far stripped of their original function, so charged with symbolism, that what remained looked merely like old junk-empty aspirin bottles, metal rings, keys, curling-pins; all worthless rubbish, save to the eye of the initiate. (Cocteau, 2011 [1929]: 24)

...But a dull evil has remained with me. I know what a well of being is. ...I must admit that the well of my greatest terrors was always the well of my goose game.

All That I Can Tell From Here

Like patting the walls for a light switch, I am stumped. Choosing to write about a little boy named George, I am reminded of my own early years of glum shadows and dark furniture like the living room carpet, a faded navy blue in an oriental pattern, and coarse like horsehair. Should I continue? The past can be measureless and hazy. I retrieve stories of my childhood. I have souvenirs. Materials that survived these years, what I held onto were untouched in my closet for many years. There was a souvenir box of seashells my grandmother bought for me

at a beach store. I was not on this trip, but I loved this thin yellow box that had a tiny seahorse, thumb sized ochre sea sponge, glowing baby pearl, starfish, scallop shell. These marine curios were affixed inside the box and given the title Wonders of the Sea. Across the lid I wrote my name, address and phone number and the title My Shells in my best cursive. Other buried gems of childhood was my Brownie Scout embroidered badges sewn onto a sash like tiny stories.

This research uses visual ethnographic methods to focus on materiality and memories of childhood. As a researcher, I see materiality defined as what connects us, the stuff of the world that conveys a particular sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. I find the nature of materiality porous, allowing the child's uniqueness to be seen in their interactions between the materials and the child's self-determined meaning. Materiality has such sensory qualities. When I discovered Sarah Pink's book *Doing Sensory Ethnography Second Edition* (2015), I had found a means to sort through material evidence. I began wondering about the relationship between materials and childhood.

The materiality connecting my remembered childhood and the art making of the children is in the "mundane" (Miller, 1987, p. 41), or rather found in the day-to-day. As a preschool art teacher I saw a little boy, George, select scraps, corks, buttons, yarn, drawing papers, tiny cardboard boxes to construct an imaginary world. As a child, I, too, used my imagination to juxtapose fragments of my life to create tiny semblances of a bigger world. Could George's miniature worlds be connected to own embodied past? Material fluctuates and embodies "social constructions, cognitions, scientific attitudes and ethical attitudes" (Iovino & Opperman, 2014, p. 5). This amalgamation of self and material is the source of life's narratives (Iovina & Opperman, 2014). Abram (2010) writes in a similar way about this idea, that the world's imagination is an "ever-unfolding story" embedding "our variously sensitive bodies" (pp. 270- 272). I found the scholarship of research interwoven with the sensuous.

Self-Portrait on a Sack

Beginning the fall of my kindergarten year and every year until I was 12, I was measured and given a new pair of burgundy leather school shoes. My mother picked these shoes out. They had perforated toes and two leather straps that crossed the bridge of my foot. There were brass buckles – two on each shoe that allowed for adjustments. I was staring down at this first pair as they brushed the John Bee grocery sack that was cut flat, the seams fully opened so I had enough room to paint my five - year old torso. This was November 1956, in a Midwest kindergarten housed in a school built with WPA funding. The classroom had high ceilings, walls of casement windows and black speckled linoleum. I was supposed to paint a winter self-portrait. I was not hesitant to paint. I was a drawer and loved art materials. I sensed others' bodies, holding long handled brushes, with their own John Bee Grocery Store sacks opened on the floor. I knew my winter wear so I painted blue snow pants, black rubber buckle boots, and a red winter coat. I remember painting my head – an intense pink orb with blue eyes and dabbing yellow brush strokes for hair. Then I paused. How would I paint the hood of my coat? The hood was made of a material like a sock. How would I differentiate the hood from the heavy wool material of my coat? I looked down at my portrait. I was stumped, unsure of how to solve the sock-hood dilemma. Miss Hammond told us to clean up. My noggin looked bald. The tiny yellow lines of hair feathered the pink dome and gave me a gruesome old look. I panicked – there was no time to lose. I dipped my brush into the creamy white paint and made a thick arch that floated inches above my head. The hood took shape and like a shell of an egghead, did the job. This was me.

This research study is best served through a "multi-sensory methodology" (Pink, 2009, p. 122). Multi-sensory methodology sees artifacts beyond their given materiality and biography to include an embodied emotional relationship between the researcher and the participant. This

methodology fancies the imagination as “fuel for action” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 7) and uses evocative words that quiver, provoke, yearn to spark understandings. While use of narrative is used in dominant forms of ethnography and considered reliable, sensory ethnography narrative is unconventional based on the postmodern realization that knowledge cannot be pure. The allure of materials resides in the animation to tell a story, a way to know another.

Pink (2009) argues for a knowing that is located in the relationships among “bodies, minds, and the materiality and the sensoriality of the environment” (p. 25). Sensory ethnography relies on experiences to intertwine with memories in the form of ineffable odors, auditory triggers, skin senses, and pictured images. These qualities, if present in the physical result of art making, convey an emotional importance for the artist and the viewer- or the researcher and the participant. I found the sensory writing saturated in autoethnology taking on the form of testimony.

Sensory ethnography engages in creative research methods. What emerged from my writing was my testimony built from fragments of sensory rich memories triggered by the children’s interactions with materiality. Imaginative play that I remembered had emotion at its roots. (Yates, 1996). Memory was awakened through the intense or eccentric, charming or hideous, funny or gross. What the body can do is housed in memory as fragments, ruins, adorations, layers, interruptions, corners, splinters.

My story reveals a violence that disrupts the silence of innocence of childhood. I find the written page as a threshold between imagination and knowing and on it interpreted my memories. These fragments deconstruct childhood as a universal passage of naive bliss with a need to be protected and trained to particular individuals who form their identity from bits and pieces of authentic experience. This identity is not the result of a self-contained narrative, as desirable as this would be, but is fragmented, internalized, and materialized in a body that can hold itself responsible for this pain.

During the day my brothers and I were adversaries. Their idea of fun was to grab me around the neck and throw me to the ground. My solution was to stop them with a silly anecdote or a jingle from television. My brothers fought to hurt each other. When my baby brother was born, I was almost seven years old. To make room for the baby, my bed was moved into my brothers’ room. I remember nights of clowning around, making my brothers laugh hard and crazy. I cracked them up with, “Rubber doggie squeak toy,” and “My name is Mister Peabody-P-E-A-B-O-D-Y!” I felt that my brothers loved me. Amid our nightly hysterics, my father would enter with a fury, flip on the lights, rip off my sheet, grab my ankles, and yank me upside down, and deliver a wild swat. Sometimes my father threw the blankets on me again before moving to my brothers. Sometimes my brothers got it first. Then he left. The room held an unforgettable stillness, like after something breaks.

Calm? I am calm. I am not a dope. I know what this is all about. I need to keep my trap shut. Uh oh, my ponytail has been twisted sideways. The elastic band makes a knot behind my right ear and it hurts. I am tugging on the elastic band and it slides off my ponytail. I can hear my brothers breathing. I am anxious. In the morning my hair will be a rat's nest. My mom will be angry. When she brushes my hair, it's like someone is pinching my eyes. No one knows how sad I am.

Watching a small boy wrap tinfoil and twine radiates across space and can reveal sensory and living bits that are intimate and humbling. Narrating through thick description is one process, yet the intuitive can be unwritable (Brace & Johns-Putra, 2010, p. 402). How to fully explain the fragments of another? Materials can be a bridge, a common stomping ground, a rubbing of elbows. This stuff washed ashore is immersed in smells, textures, sounds, images and tastes, fully imploded with imagination and memories (Stoller, 1997), heightens empathy, intimacy, self-reflexivity to help understand lives of others. The child’s body, as a unique

material and an arm of the mind, engages with the stuff in the artroom. To be an observer in this moment feels intimate.

Sensory ethnographers conclude that materials trigger memory. For example, Okely (1994) researched the elderly in France using contemporary sensory experiences to grasp this population's biographies. Working with elders on their farms, Okely could learn about their sensorial experiences and they too learned of hers. Okely was surprised to discover how the sensorial, brought up childhood memories. Okely's research calls to mind the Cartesian issue of the dematerialization of self. The physical contact of patting, shriveling, prying, jamming, in other words the engagement with materials broadens the quality of interactions with others, marks time, and grounds one to the world. If mind is entwined with the physical, as the material body or the materiality in the world seen in memory and social engagement then the Cartesian argument has a significant impact. Environmental decisions, boundaries between nations, world significance of poverty, are examples how materiality has global influences both politically and ethically (Baxter & McKay, 2011).

This study hopes to show the significance of materiality for its role in constructing self through the emotional nature of memory. The writer will provide examples of memory triggered by materiality causing the rupture of truth, challenging the belief of childhood as a passive traveler in the world but as a protagonist for their own learning. The culture of childhood must be seen in the context where children and adults interact, where children make sense of their future through current activities. Instead of attending to the perceptions adults have of the child, I focused on the child and how they used materials to animate their imaginations. This study was a slow process. The children used materials to express their feelings, what they came to value from being part of a larger culture.

Sublime Moment

Artmaking is about *doing* in the world, about *expressing* a way of *being* in the world. As a teacher and a researcher, I am curious about the self-directed artmaking of children. When artmaking is not to please an audience, for example teacher designed art projects, but to answer a question of one's own making, I feel I am in the presence of the real.

For ten years, I was a preschool art teacher at a Reggio Emilia inspired school in the Midwest. There were two classrooms of young children, ages 3 to 5, that flanked the art room where I taught. Doors were open, children flowed, and "aesthetic and everyday practices became closely intertwined" (Boym, 1998, p. 502). I filled this studio with both traditional and non-traditional art materials. Traditional materials included, for example, colored markers, tempera paints, glues of all sorts, colored masking tape, scotch tape, electrical tape, scissors, staplers, string, yarn, and fabric scraps. There were also eight easels and a massive roll of heavy white paper that was mounted on a spring clipped metal dispenser. There was a drawing table with an assortment of paper, pencils and erasers, and a sturdy woodworking table with an iron vise and actual tools.

The non-traditional materials included car hubcaps, steering wheels, colored wire, bicycle rims, a life-sized skeleton, egg cartons, plastic bottles, toilet paper tubes, gift wrap tubes, rolls of corkboard, pieces of cellphones and other appliances, scrap wood, spools, and a typewriter, all available to the children and made accessible on low shelves. The children were free to use these materials as they wished. There were innumerable choices for children to make using materials. I saw egg cartons get used, imagined, and repurposed in multiple ways— as roofing material, dangerous pits, homes for baby animals, and fences around tiny homes. For example, a child forced a 12-inch nail through the lip of a 42 ounce Quaker Oats cylinder and out the other side. The nail now resembled a narrow bridge. The four-year-old wrapped string around the center point of the nail and tied the free end to a pink paper cup. He then stuck a

small wooden spool on the point of the nail, which acted as a knob. He turned it one direction, unwound the string and lowered the cup into the Quaker Oats container (by twisting the spool in the opposite direction, he raised the cup).

Four-year-old George spent several hours in the art studio each day. He began as a painter, filling large sheets of easel paper with portraits of sharks, both in and out of the water. I kept the easel trays lined with jars of uncommon tempera colors, like lavender gray, yellow green, eggshell, chamois, burnt sienna, hot pink, olive, and chrome orange. Georgie's sharks were unusual two-toned color combinations that stretched from one edge of the paper to the other. George wanted to paint realistically and referred to an *Eyewitness Book on Sharks*, which he propped open next to the easel. Sometimes George told a story about the shark, but not always. "When sharks are babies they are cute. When they are big, they are just a little bit cute."

One morning George arrived full of talk about a Hawkeye cheerleader named Ashley. George discovered Ashley while browsing an Iowa Hawkeye sports promotional magazine. Ashley was in several photographs: cheering from the sidelines and as a smiling block in the human pyramid that was embraced by the cornflower blue of an Iowa sky. Ashley appeared to be about 21 years old, had platinum blonde shoulder length hair, chose bright red lipstick, and sported an athletic figure. George told me, "I cut out pictures of Ashley. I love her." In the sidelines picture, Ashley was posing on the fifty-yard line with her pompom over her heart. With a paper punch, George made a small hole near the top of the picture, strung an orange piece of yarn through the small hole and wore this necklace for more than a week. Then, I noticed George gluing a stiff piece of yellow paper to the back of the photo to prevent tearing.

At the easel George painted portraits of Ashley, at the drawing table he made Hawkeye football paper dolls, and at the woodworking bench he made small gifts for Ashley. "I think she will like this flyswatter I made," he said, demonstrating the effectiveness of a small square of screen wire taped to a paper towel tube. George explained, "I like Hawkeye colors. I painted Ashley. It was my dream. She is smiling because she is happy to be sitting next to me in my dream."

Seremetakis (1994) who researched memory and emotions wrote, "Memory is stored in substances that are shared, just as social substances are stored in social memory which is sensory" (p. 28). Sensory memories are part of our biographies and arrive through reflexivity. The sharing of another's experience, as located in the material, can ignite memory in the researcher and in the act of writing the researcher can develop a fuller sense of self and culture. The materiality in the art studio, whether ephemeral, imaginary, physical, or theoretical, fosters self-understanding and a connection with the world through shared cultural memory.

In stories and in memories, meaning and material overlap (Iovina & Opperman, 2014) and what goes on inside a person and between a person and their world stands as an interpretation (Wheeler, 2006). For example, George's flyswatter became an object to express George's care for the cheerleader, whom he could imagine using this flyswatter. The anecdote of how George's flyswatter entered my life triggered memories of a dark time in my childhood. As a toddler, my mother would whip me with a fly swatter that left hot red blotches on my small calves and sometimes on my arms. Often mundane objects are stored in my memory and have the power to trigger varying emotional reactions. (Yates, 1996).

Merrymaking

When I was teaching, the children were allowed to work in the art room, except during lunch, group time, or outdoor play. Merry, a four-year old, was painting at the easel mid-morning when I asked her what interested her most. She answered, "Pigs, Wonder Woman, Luke Skywalker as a kid, wiggling my ears (her grandfather taught her), bunnies and her five cats, I wish I could marry them." Merry finishes painting, "The pink is the pink milk and the

red is the red lava. I am on the pink milk jumping over the red lava.” I saw a blurring of boundaries between children’s ideas and objects from the larger culture- the visual and the non-visual. When Merry lifts her backpack to the drawing table and unzips the pocket, she says, “Maybe I’ll have some of this,” reaching deep inside and pulling out a package of pink Extra gum and a remote-control device. “This is from a toy car I got for Christmas that does not work.” The bag also holds a putty colored rotary dial phone handpiece, a black walkie talkie, a gold hinge, a small round mirror (that Merry demonstrates) and a green folder, adding, “That little drop of blood on the front happened when I was three years old.” Though I could not tackle why, exactly, certain objects were meaningful for Merry, I was able to distinguish between the objects that held an emotional significance, and those that did not.

Each object in Merry’s backpack collection had a story emanating from a material. Built from fragments of Merry’s memory, these stories shaped Merry’s reality. Walter Benjamin (1999) referred to the method of pleasing things entering our space, and gave the example of Cathedral of Chartres. This esteemed building had the power to impact his life. Benjamin (1999) wrote, “We don’t displace our being into theirs; they step into our life” (p. 206). It is in this sense that Merry’s objects became part of her life, meaning and material overlapped. So too the children stepped into my life. I began a doctoral dissertation collecting digital images, brief imovies, interviews with children and parents and hours of observation. Despite the non-intrusive nature of this study, I did complete an IRB. Materials seemed to be a key means for children to articulate feelings and desires (Miller, 1987). I observed how children who publicly cherished their art making affected others. Their peers answered by mimicking with materials or similar self-assignments. For example, one child would begin hammering at the woodworking bench, shouting, “I am making a birdhouse.” Later at the paint easels I would find other children painting birds in a nest and birdhouses. Someone usually learned a skill from another to express their own feelings.

The art room was lively with material innovations such as these. George wrapped a 2”x 4”x 5” block of scrap wood with two hundred rubber bands. I observed great variability and, at times, ambiguity in the meaning and significance of things to different people (Tilley, 2001). Merry, for example, did not see the easel as a place to tell stories until she picked up a wet brush to illustrate her father’s haunted clothes hanger. While Merry’s beginnings at the easel might have sprung from listening to others’ stories, she nonetheless became adept with the materials. She painted again and again, she told longer stories, and was relaxed and did short performances with her stories, too. It was clear that when Merry combined narrative with easel painting, the material had significance in her life.

I witnessed other uses for the easel, too. Some children saw it as a place to paint patterns or experiment with materials. “This is the world’s biggest bumper brush. It is so big it won’t break if it bumps into something,” “You hold the brush over the jar until the drips go away.” “You can paint little lines with a big brush.” “I learned that paint shows up on paint. You don’t have to leave white circled behind it.” Every object has the potential to expand possibilities. As combinations of things are multiplied in the world, new ways of being are revealed (Murphie, 2002; O’Sullivan, 2006; Zurmuehlen & Kantner, 1995).

I feel an empathy with the child for the magical hold of these fragments. The imagination invests the mundane bric-a-brac with a power to stand for something bigger. Taken out of context and juxtaposed with another fragment, the child’s assemblage work takes on new complexity. The re-use of small objects shows a disregard for the traditional intention of the object. The child sees the expression of their feelings and ideas as more important than adhering to the object’s original function. Children did not hesitate behaving as if it was perfectly natural to imagine a cork as a stool or a tire gauge as a streetlight.

During construction and once completed, the child sets the artwork in a certain place, protected from the appropriation of others. Children make warnings “DO NOT TOUCH.” For

the child, this work has become sacred. I remember what it was like to make something new that changed my small landscape. The importance of fragments in the artwork of children, reminds me how pieces of our past lives, our memories, are sacred and not static.

The easel was like a friend to Merry. She worked at and with the easel three times a week. She mixed her own paints and painted in series, which included paintings about family friends, light sabers, even swimming pools. In one portrait, for example, there was no space for the right arm, so Merry painted the arm cut off and bleeding. "Oh, no, Tom has to go to the hospital!" cried Merry. Things have "a particularly close relationship to emotion, feelings and basic orientations to the world" (Miller, 1987, p. 107).

If the sensorial is indeed triggered by our engagement with materials, I believe that my memories of childhood were triggered by participating in the shared studio experience at the preschool. I observe children in the art room making things that, like my misfit collections, embody emotion and have a sense of value that is more obvious when you are there to hear their stories. George combines small cardboard boxes, pipe cleaners, buttons, baby food jars, toilet paper tubes, egg cartons, wood scraps, duct tape, bottle caps and Popsicle sticks. George tells me that he is making a house for Ashley. Alex, who also paints at the easel, says, "I miss my old house. I can picture it right in front of my face." When the house is underway, George says, "Once upon a time she went to a football game and cheered. She has a cat. After the game is over, she goes and has lunch. I love the cheerleader!"

I asked George what he would eat if he were to have lunch with the cheerleader. He replied, "I would have whatever she has." I asked what the cheerleader does when she is not cheering. "She plays with me." George continues, "We would talk about Dumbo. Some people add buttons for luck. I bought this for my cheerleader." George showed me a tiny golden ring with a heart soldered to the band. Where did George get this ring? Did he first find the ring and then decide to fold it into his story? I believe George has learned hearts and rings stand for affection in the larger culture.

I appreciate the emotional relationship between George and the cheerleader. He announces he loves her. The continued time and energy George puts into his stories and the selection of materials shows his affection for the cheerleader. When George talks about the house, the necklace, the photographs, the portraits and the ring, his face reflects this joy.

It is intriguing that nonmaterial cultural forms, like feelings, beliefs and attitudes, young children express in material forms. I wondered what kinds of things do children choose to help them think? What materials are most meaningful to children? Do sensory properties draw children to select materials? Is durability an issue for children? As the viewer of the children's art making, my emotional reaction to their work affects what materials I continue to bring to the studio. I am captivated by their resolve and imaginations. What the child makes, strategies of assemblage, decisions of selection and rejection, and what materials hold appeal or discomfort, tells me a great deal. I can get a toehold about the child's humor, their imagination, their risk-taking, and the range of knowledge the child has of the larger culture.

For example, a six-year-old child cups a softball-sized knot of fabric and then uses masking tape to hold it in place. Using rubber bands the child wraps it all in red fabric. Next the child ties the ball with blue potholder loops and drapes an assortment of long thin strips of crimson. The child has a visual memory of an actual heart, has an interest in fabric and enjoys piecing things together. I found the heart squeezed between the ribs of the miniature plastic skeleton.

I compare the significance of this heart sculpture with George's gift for the cheerleader. George's choice of the ring reflects George's knowledge that certain objects represent emotional significance in the larger culture. Both children were aware of materials that make up the world. Both children used the objects as prompts to tell a story. "Here is the ring for my true love the cheerleader," says George. And the six-year old, "The skeleton needs this."

As I witnessed children interacting with material, they became valuable informants. I saw the legitimacy of their ideas. They animated forces to propel their ideas into serious aspirations. This was not trivial but serious work. Childhood was not a conglomeration of charming memorabilia but has a sterner side- the focused effort to be fully human.

Tender Trees

In the back corner of our front yard there was a grouping of young birch trees. As a five-year old I discovered the magic of these trees. If I stood inches from the birch trees and picked with my finger, I could peel off the bark. What a curious texture. It was like onion-skin, curling when it came loose. I collected these ivory scraps and wrote tiny messages. Over the summer I removed hundreds of tiny white curls. I discovered that scratching off the feathery bark left a delicate pink layer underneath, like a scab pulled off my knee. All summer I kept the birch trees smooth and tidy, peeling layer upon layer trying to keep the white skin even.

The materials I stock in the children's studio are shifting ephemeral stuff that I am drawn to. When I collect materials for the small studio, I find a "stickiness," a pull towards certain things that I become attached to (Gell, 1998, pp. 14-15). I am intrigued when children repurpose materials. I love the inventiveness revealed in their decisions that evidence life. I consider materiality a thing having its own sensory qualities, an infectious energy, with an uncanny feel. Jane Bennett (2010) describes materiality as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (p. 6). For example, the children's easel is an inanimate object but is a site where children paint their stories; others see those stories and are affected emotionally by the images. In other words, the easel is a site of "presentational forms" where children reflect as they worked, finding a stopping point, to reveal the full composition (Langer, 1953). Throughout this process young easel artists and their audience were affected in a plethora of ways by the inanimate. The materials triggered possibility. Furthermore, the easel where Merry told her story of the pink milk jumping over the red lava is what Deleuze would label a "quasi-causal operator" (DeLanda, 2002, p. 123) – something to tip over the first domino, to start a happening. Not only did Merry begin a lava series that really took off, but among children in the studio lava hubbub lasted all day.

Bennett (2010) suggests that inanimate things can create effects. She releases the concept of materiality from its traditional connection to that all things (living things included) are made up of parts that act in isolation to one another, or automatism, a system of unconscious motion, and bases her theory on vitalism. Bennett (2010) describes this energy producing conglomerate as the assemblage or the "energetic vitality" in things (p. 5).

An assemblage, as an inanimate object, can also hold a vitalism. The Cheerleader's house fits the definition of an assemblage or "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements" (Bennett, 2010, p. 23). The concept of assemblage, as interpreted in the contemporary assemblages of Oyvind Fahlstrom is a "play with temporality and narrative ..." (Kelley, 1995, p. 20). O'Sullivan (2005), explaining thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari, "...the use of stuff of the world to produce something new" (p. 152). The artist enters into art making while acting in tandem with materials. Jackson Pollock describes this process, "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I am doing. ... I have no fears about making changes... because the painting has a life of its own" (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 165). The artist is pulled to make things of this world, what Germano Celant calls "connectivity," or "arte povera" (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 165). Each piece of the assemblage, then, (human and non-human) affects the other (Bennett, 2010, p. 22).

The Cheerleader's house was an assemblage constructed from a wide assortment of objects. George, like Pollock, appeared to see possibilities in the array of materials and reflected on his decisions. George cared about each piece that was chosen, even particular about the final coat of paint. The house embodied a feeling of fondness, care, and desire. His

intuitions lead him to make an emotive assemblage. In other words, George selected particular inanimate fragments and by pulling them out of their context, or selecting them, gave them meaning. When it was complete, the assemblage had a vital materiality, that “hint(s) of the inanimate in plants, and the vegetable in animals” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 95), like the world hiding below a surface. I saw the embodiment of feeling in George’s range of artmaking. For example, he chose a fuzzy orange yarn to loop through the cheerleader’s photograph to wear around his neck. Like our chenille bedspread, the yarn had some limitations, but George imagined the yarn to be a material form that could express his feelings. Snipped from its place as an orbit in the orange ball, the yarn took on a new use, as a means to express his feelings. At times the necklace was removed from his neck and spun in an orbit with his index finger. Why did George take the necklace off so often and spin it around? I guessed it was scratchy. Often I saw the trajectory of the necklace hit the ceiling, demonstrating inertia. The electric feel in the studio, the rich materiality of the object, the “spirit in matter” (Langer, 1953, p. 58) and the propelling movement of the inanimate thing supported Bennett’s description of vitalism.

When making decisions, George took his time and told me what he was doing. George glued a cork on the property “for a stool for the Cheerleader,” and glued small pieces of wood around the perimeter of the imaginary yard to suggest a fence. George insisted the whole piece—yard, fence, wall, and door—be painted solid yellow. It took real focus to see all the detail and to integrate it. Portraits of the cheerleader were drawn on yellow construction paper and the photograph was glued to yellow paper and then trimmed. As he built Ashley’s house, George told stories: “My cousin reminds me of the cheerleader. She is a big girl now, but once when I was a baby she gave me a rattle.”

George could dominate this small - scale home construction and engage in imaginative play with the cheerleader. He had her in mind when he selected materials. The materials that George chose had particular sensory attributes, which enhanced the narrative potential of his play. The taping of the cardboard, the sorted buttons; all of his selected materials took on a vital energy. For example, the earlier pieces glued and taped were affected as other materials were added. There was continual invention and with this activity came a tension between the effectiveness of the new piece in relation to the resting pieces. Each piece seemed to radiate a presence, play a part to the whole. As a heterogeneous assemblage, these various pieces worked together making a unified piece that had greater significance (energy) than what I saw in the scrap pile.

Yellow paint soon saturated everything. The cheerleader’s house melded with George and through the attributes of the materials appeared to be an extension of George’s spirit. This inanimate house held deep significance and became a vital player in both George’s and my world. When I looked at the house, the house and I separated from the activity in the room. George’s house held such a sentimental attraction for me that I disassociated from the studio din. Artwork can cause this reaction in me. When experiencing a particular art piece, I can feel absorbed to the point that the object and I bond and for a few moments, all else is superfluous. I develop a relationship with the artwork.

I see George’s cork stool in the garden conveying a feeling of gentleness while the wooden walls express the clarity and call for boundaries. One key aspect of vitalism, as described by Bennett, is the way in which “thinghood and human being overlap” (2010, p. 4). Sparked by gazing upon the finished little house, my body experienced emotional memories. This assemblage was vibrant for not only George, but for me too. I knew George would take Ashley’s home with him. I would miss this little house: it held an intensity of feeling for me.

I sensed tenderness from George’s assemblages, an emotion that occurs alongside a feeling of vulnerability. The loss that accompanies tenderness is desire. Roland Barthes (1978) defines tenderness as “nothing but an infinite, insatiable metonymy” (p. 230), or as I see in George’s little house, an object embodying all affection for the cheerleader. Perhaps, like

diasporic intimacy (Boym, 1998), the house becomes an object of George's affection, not for his loss of home and homeland, but to create a delicate comfort. In other words, as a four-year-old George is transforming, becoming more autonomous, engaging with a broader life around him, he creates new narratives and secrets; he is exposed to chance encounters. He carries distant images of his home, but experiences the pleasures in the foreign. The materiality in the studio provides a language for George to express this loss and pleasure. George's artworks express a friendship with the Cheerleader, imagining possibility. This is tenderness, or the expression of possibility after loss (Boym, 1998).

I remember the feeling of this tenderness in artmaking when I was a child. When I was six, my first-grade teacher taught us to draw Pilgrims using manila paper and a few crayons. There was a template we traced for the head shape, but we were free to give the pilgrim any facial expression. My pilgrim had red lips that were askew, as if the pilgrim was smirking. The teacher stressed all Pilgrim hats must have large gold buckles. I loved coloring with black and couldn't stop. Besides I had never seen anyone with a giant buckle on their hat. The look seemed ridiculous. So, I kept working. The edge of my buckle shape became smaller and smaller. Soon space for the buckle was tiny like the size of a postage stamp. I wanted to eliminate the buckle completely. It looked insignificant and sloppy.

My teacher thought a tiny buckle was better than none and demanded that I stop. I have a vivid memory of working on this portrait. Despite the tracing, I worked back and forth between facial features –e.g. the hair, the hat, and the collar. I was active and enjoying materials as a provocation, stimulated by the quality of the crayons. As such, what I knew of the world, expanded through the mark making. I saw the crayon creating a thickness that hid what was underneath. I experienced autonomy- even my small decisions made a difference. I was dislocated from my desk, from the feel of my feet on the floor, the sounds of others rubbing crayons on paper, from the irregular tapping of the teachers heels on the linoleum floor. I was stung by a curiosity of what I could do with the crayons to create a semblance of a Pilgrim. I asked myself questions. The materials triggered invention, the cause and effect and a potential. I felt life become bigger. I was provoked to act. My actions were making something in the world, not merely being in the world. I could do something with the sensations: the jostling, swinging, gasping, chasing, hiding, shaking, or the intensities of the world. Juxtaposing this with that, experiencing revelations that came from the messing about, I experienced a becoming, I felt a singular connection with the pilgrim drawing and a sense of loss that the drawing would end with the bell. In all of this a rich contact a vibrancy emerged from the substance (Grosz, 2001, p. 149). The Pilgrim has been framed for years and continues to radiate. I still feel tenderness when I look at him.

What Stays

My therapist says, "Change is possible and happens all of the time." I really wish I could just start over again. I am tearing off an old layer while a new one is waiting in the wings. But, when the time comes to change, even for the better, I cannot move. As a very young child, I used materials to disassociate from my fears. I experimented using masking tape to patch holes in my tennis shoes; fingernail clippers to cut string; birch bark to write messages. I personified certain objects and experienced them intimately: my mirror became the screen of an imaginary child's television set; slippers were living sleighs for my tiny dolls; crayons forgotten under the bed were families on a journey. The materials supported my desires to imagine, experiment and have sensory encounters with the world (Tolia-Kelly & Rose, 2012).

It is painful, to re-experience my childhood. I want my childhood to be lilacs by the window and a small body curled in a maple bed with a carved steamship on the headboard. I want my childhood images of a sleeping body warmed by morning light. This is a brief truth.

There were sour diapers, screaming, my mother's hair damp and clinging to her skull, yellow liquid pooling on the floor, everyone in faded Keds with crescent rubber toes, broken glass, and nowhere safe to go. I spent time between my conscious and my unconscious. I daydreamed. Time stood still and I pretended to be elsewhere.

My world of shouting, punishment, slamming, collisions, humiliation and bruises, was a place I tried to control. I recognized my own misery but it did not occur to me my life could change. I felt vulnerable because my mother did not seem to like me. On my seventh birthday I planned to give each parent a gift. I remember searching outdoors in neighbors' garbage cans. Nothing much until I found a pair of channel lock pliers in the street next to the curb. I remember the heaviness, the long hooked arms coated in blue rubber and a tiny head with jagged teeth. During breakfast I was given a rubber Dennis the Menace doll. "I have something for you!" I cried and gave my father the pliers. Did I believe this material thing would help?

No one rehearses for childhood. I arrived unprepared. I knew what I was not. I knew what my parents thought about me, about children. Watching my mother nap, I stood quietly. Her closed eyes looked like shell noodles. My mother's eyebrows were uneven. One was missing some hair. I learned years later, this was the result of a sledding accident. Some children know what to do. I never did. When I asked my kindergarten teacher Miss Hammond if I could hold the Humpty Dumpty sitting high on the top shelf, she tells me no. I felt exposed, humiliated, and silently sobbed. This was a childish expression of pain.

Sensuous Dispositions

Using the materials at hand children made something new in the world and in the process transformed themselves through new ways to express meaning. I saw children's notions of time expand through choosing miniature fragments to create a personal artifact, a stand-in for memory. The small art making allowed children to pretend, to dream. I feel it was partially empathy for the material that allowed the child to re- create their story. The material came to life when the story was told.

I realize after years of self-narrative or the shaping of my memories into stories, my childhood identity was influenced by how, what and when I used materials. I preferred some materials over others. Transforming familiar objects into something else or re contextualizing them, I created a new gaze for reflection. This disrupted the belief, "Oh, this goes without saying." No, everything does not go without saying. As a child my affinity with certain materials and juxtaposing them in unusual ways freed me to enjoy interacting with the world.

In the children's artwork, I anticipated discovering this same joy. I was reminded of the plasticity of materials and the playful possibilities. The child's artwork became what Bachelard called "my dream instrument" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 150) or what I looked through to retrieve my memory of freedom and play. While observing I re-lived my own childhood liberation. Sometimes this feeling was painful. In the fragility of this intimacy all things hold an elasticity or a possibility to be something else or to be a part of something else.

References

- Abram, D. (2010). *Becoming animal: An earthly cosmology*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bachelard, G. (1964). *The poetics of space*. New York, NY: Orion Press.
- Barthes, R. (1978). *A lover's discourse*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Baxter, D. A., & McKay, S. W. (2011). Maternal representation, intersubjectivity, and the making of the self. In P. Bolin & D. Blandy (Eds.), *Matter matters* (pp. 36-46). Reston, VA., NAEA.

- Benjamin, W. (1999). *The arcades project*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press.
- Brace, C., & Johns-Putra, A. (2010). *Process: Landscape and text*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press.
- DeLanda, M. (2002). *Intensive science and virtual philosophy*. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. (1991). *Empiricism and subjectivity: An essay on Hume's theory of human nature*. (C.V. Boundras, Trans.) New York, NY: Zone Books.
- Boym, S. (1998). On diasporic intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's installations and immigrant homes. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(Winter), 498-524.
- Cocteau, J. (2011/1929). *Les enfants terribles: Roman*. Paris, France: B. Grasset.
- Gell, A. (1998). *Art and agency: An anthropological theory*. Oxford, UK: Claredon Press.
- Grosz, E. (2001). The thing. In P. Lange-Berndt (Ed.), *Materiality* (pp. 146-149). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Iovino S., & Opperman, S. (2014). *Material ecocriticism: Materiality, agency, and models of narrativity*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.
- Kelley, M. (1995). 'Myth Science.' In Ö. Fahlström (Ed.), *Öyvind Fahlström: The installations* (pp.19-27). Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz.
- Langer, S. (1953). *Feeling and form*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Miller, D. (1987). *Material culture and mass consumption*. New York, NY: Basil Blackwell.
- Murphie, A. (2002). Putting virtual back into VR. In B. Massumi (Ed.), *A shock to thought* (pp. 188-214). London, UK: Routledge.
- Okely, J. (1994). Vicarious and sensory knowledge of chronology and change: Ageing in rural France. In K. Hastrup & P. Hervik (Eds.), *Social experience and anthropological knowledge* (pp. 45-64). London, UK: Routledge.
- O'Sullivan, S. (2005). *Art encounters Deleuze and Guattari*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pellegram, A. (1998). The message in paper. In D. Smith (Ed.), *Material cultures: Why somethings matter* (pp. 103-120). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pink, S. (2009). *Doing sensory ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pink, S. (2015). *Doing sensory ethnography* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Seremetakis, C. N. (1994). The memory of the senses: Historical perception, commensal exchange, and modernity. In L. Taylor (Ed.), *Visualizing theory* (pp. 1-18). London, UK: Routledge.
- Stoller, P. (1997). *Sensuous scholarship*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Tilley, C. (2001). Ethnography and material culture. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 258-272). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tolia-Kelly, D. P., & Rose, G. (2012). *Visuality/materiality: Images, objects and practices*. Farnham, England: Routledge.
- Wheeler, W. (2006). *The whole creature*. London, UK: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Yates, F. (1996). The art of memory. In J. McConkey (Ed.), *The anatomy of memory* (pp. 9-17). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Zurmuehlen, M., & Kantner, L. (1995). The narrative quality of young children's art. In C. Thompson (Ed.), *The visual arts and early childhood learning* (pp. 6-9). Reston, VA: NAEA.

Author Note

Vicky J. Grube is Professor of Art Education at Appalachian State University. She has published numerous articles in *Visual Arts Research*, *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, *Cultural Studies=Critical Methodologies* and *Arts Education* among other

publications. She is the artist and writer of several graphic novels one being *The True Story of a Hard Worker, the true story of Fanny Lou Hamer* and is featured at Quimby's in Chicago. She began a Room 13 program for children in North Carolina based on the internationally respected Room 13 in Scotland. This after school ART program is run by the children and the work is NOT school art but based on the genuine desires of the children. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: grubev@appstate.edu.

Copyright 2017: Vicky J. Grube and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Grube, V. J. (2017). Material forms: What is really going on? Shaping who we are and what we do. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(11), 3075-3087. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss11/17>
